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CHOU EN-LAI AND THE OPENING TO THE WEST

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## Report Documentation Page

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## INTRODUCTION

The announcement on July 15, 1971, that President Nixon had accepted an invitation to travel to Beijing to meet with Chinese leaders must have surprised the people of China, and of the world, in view of the state of affairs both within China and the world at that time. China itself was still in the waning period of the great Cultural Revolution which had been launched in 1966. Diplomatic relations between China and the United States had not existed for over twenty years, and the rift in Chinese-Soviet relations had badly deteriorated over the previous dozen years. The rhetoric of Chinese foreign policy was to encourage "people's war" against U.S. imperialism and its lackeys.

The strategy of Premier Chou En Lai to reopen ties to the West via a rapprochement with the United States in that environment makes sense, however, when viewed in the larger context of China's national interests: the security and economic well-being of its 800 million people, and the preservation of its ideological faith for future generations. China viewed the presence of Soviet troops on its borders as well as the potential Soviet dominance of communist ideology as threats to its vital national interests. Moreover, the aftermath of both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution left the economy severely weakened, thereby threatening the well-being of its large population.

To enhance and protect China's vital national interests, Chou sought a state of global equilibrium. To meet that goal, the priority was to counter Soviet power and aggression. This he proposed to do by utilizing diplomacy to normalize relations with the United States, thereby creating a counterweight to Soviet power. Furthermore, by ending its isolation and reaching out to normalize relations with the United States, China would be able to avail itself of the much needed technological information from the West. If

China's economy was to grow to meet the demands of its large population, contact with the West was indicated

That Chou En Lai was able to carry out his strategy of reopening ties to the West was due in large part to a confluence of interests in normalizing relations, i.e., the United States was a willing partner. At the same time, the considerable diplomatic skill exhibited by Chou En Lai was an important factor in the implementation of the strategy. His role in reaching an acceptable agreement between China and the United States, as expressed in the Shanghai Communique issued at the conclusion of President Nixon's visit on February 28, 1972, was considerable.

## DISCUSSION

To set the stage for an analysis of the statecraft of Chou En Lai in opening ties to the West, the discussion will begin with a brief review of the "realities" facing Chou both within China and the international environment in the time period preceding the invitation to President Nixon.

In the late 1960's, the political and economic instability of the Cultural Revolution was still very much in evidence in China. Revolutionary and anti-imperialist rhetoric was the order of the day. The current "culture" did not appear to be conducive to a major switch in foreign policy. At a minimum, any plan to make such a change would require considerable skill in public diplomacy to bring the populace around.

At the same time, Chou and others who had been involved in the Communist movement for some fifty years, were able to see the current domestic situation with a long view. They had been on the Long March in 1934, had struggled through the Japanese

invasion, the civil war, the Korean War, the Great Leap Forward and other chaotic events in their long quest to build a nation based on their socialist ideology. Thus, the current domestic situation was not viewed as an overwhelming constraint to the plan.

A specific issue on the domestic scene, however, had to be considered in any move to normalize relations with the United States. Taiwan. The Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) considered Taiwan a province of China. They refused to consider that it was anything but an internal affair, they wanted all U.S. forces and military installations withdrawn. A "two China" policy was out-of-the-question. How this issue is to be dealt with in any move to normalize relations would be a challenge to the diplomatic skills of Chou En Lai.

Finally, before leaving the discussion of the domestic environment, it is important to note one of the most important aftereffects of the radicalism of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution with its self-imposed isolationism, the state of the Chinese economy. In particular, the Chinese needed access to Western technology if certain sectors of their economy were to grow fast enough to provide for the well being of its large population. Take the oil industry, for example. The "Petroleum Group" (members of the staff of the Daring oilfield and the Ministry of Petroleum Industries) had been harassed by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, but were slowly coming back into favor. Knowing that China had neither the resources nor the technology to expand the offshore exploration and drilling required to increase production, they lobbied for access to the United States, the leader in petroleum technology. While Chinese ideology called for "self reliance," there was recognition among some of the more pragmatic Chinese leaders that access to the West could be beneficial in economic terms.

In setting the international stage, this discussion will focus primarily on China's view of the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviets were more problematic to the Chinese than the United States. Relations between China and the Soviets had been uneven since the 1920's, but the rift of the late 50's had deepened throughout the decade of the 60's, and by the time feelers from the Chinese were out to the U.S. in 1970, relations between China and the Soviet Union were tense. The dispute was both ideological and geopolitical. Beginning with the dispute in the mid 50's over Krushchev's campaign of de-Stalinization, the ideological rift continued to grow. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was, according to the Chinese, an example of "social imperialism." The Cultural Revolution railed against Soviet revisionism. Moreover, Soviet troops were massed on the Chinese border.

The Chinese view of the United States, on the other hand, was not all that positive either. The U.S. was viewed as a powerful "imperialist" nation whose system of capitalism would eventually bring it down. The Chinese noted the internal dissension in the U.S., e.g., the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement. The Chinese believed the U.S. was over-extended, and accordingly viewed the U.S. as the least fearsome of its two potential adversaries. At the time period under discussion, the United States still had some 280,000 troops in Viet Nam. While the number of troops was decreasing, and troops were being withdrawn, it was in 1970 that the U.S. expanded its bombing operations into Cambodia. Finally, a noted anti-Communist hard-liner, Richard Nixon, had been elected President of the United States in November 1968.

Before leaving this discussion of the international environment, we should note, of course, that China's foreign policy interests were not limited to the U.S. and the Soviets, but also were concerned with its Asian neighbors, Japan and India, and with its relations with the Third World.

Against that background, Premier Chou En Lai set out his plan to utilize diplomatic means to seek rapprochement with the United States. Although the United States and China had not had formal diplomatic relations for over two decades, some contact was maintained through the U.S. Embassy in Poland. At a regular meeting in Warsaw in January 1970, the Chinese mentioned the possibility of further talks at a higher level. At the same meeting, the United States suggested that it might be prepared to send a representative to China. In April of 1970, the U.S. bombed Cambodia and the momentum appeared lost. However, noting further troop withdrawals from Viet Nam, the Chinese signaled their continued interest. In December 1970 direct contact was made through the Pakistanis to Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser to President Nixon, and in July 1971, Kissinger set off on a secret mission to Beijing.

The Chinese leaders started to prepare the people of China for the rapprochement by suddenly inviting a U.S. table tennis team, which was competing in Japan, to visit China on a good-will mission. This was in April 1971, just three months before Kissinger's arrival, and the subsequent announcement on July 15 in a small box on the front page of the *People's Daily* of the invitation to President Nixon to visit China.

The first visit of Kissinger to Beijing was held in secret, at the request of the United States. The two countries had to determine whether it was indeed feasible to have a rapprochement. The list of obstacles was daunting. Taiwan, radically opposing ideologies, and years of hostility, to name but a few. The list of advantages was also significant. To name some, the very fact of rapprochement would achieve one of China's objectives, the U.S. would serve as a counterweight to Soviet hegemony. At the same time, rapprochement would also serve U.S. interests in its relations with the Soviets, with its inference to the Soviets that they could no longer speak for all Communists. Both

sides desired a state of global equilibrium and stability The U S did not want China's active involvement in Indochina The Chinese wanted access to U S technology

While the initial negotiations in July between Chou En Lai and Henry Kissinger were not intended to solve any specific bilateral problems, agreement had to be reached on the wording of an announcement of the upcoming visit of President Nixon The Chinese wanted it to appear that the U S had sought the invitation and that the purpose of the visit was to discuss Taiwan The U S , of course, objected, but eventually a compromise was found Chou and Kissinger were both intent on making the negotiations work The fact, however, that the American President was traveling to China gave the Chinese a certain psychological advantage

Kissinger traveled again to China in October to prepare for the visit of President Nixon in February This time, the visit was not in secrecy, and the Chinese used public diplomacy to further prepare the people of China for the rapprochement Events were staged and pictures taken for the newspapers to show that the Americans were welcome and important guests in China The negotiations during this visit were more important because the two sides needed to hammer out the outlines of a communiqué which would be issued at the conclusion of Nixon's visit

Chou's negotiating strategy was not a zero-sum game, i.e , Chinese gains were not at the expense of the U S Chou proposed a communique that would summarize the Chinese and American views on global politics without attempting to reconcile them This was a dramatic departure from normal communiqüs which highlight agreement or, if none is achieved, fudge over the differences The U S agreed in principle, noting that the positions should be compatible to the occasion and not pure propaganda This approach permitted Chou to maintain China's ideological positions for domestic consumption --

especially its position on Taiwan -- and also for its third world allies The approach, of course, provided the same options for the U S

The final text was negotiated during the visit of the President in February The Chinese again used public diplomacy during the visit of the President to convey the change in policy to their populace The communique concluded that both China and the United States would work for the normalization of relations between the two countries as a contribution toward the relaxation of tensions in Asia and the world

## CONCLUSION

The strategy of opening relations to the West was successful - in large part because it served the interests of both countries and the timing was right for both the Chinese and the United States Earlier in the Cultural Revolution, the pragmatic Premier would have been unable to convince Mao to push the plan forward Likewise, in the United States, it is unlikely that the people or the Congress would have accepted the rapprochement from a liberal Democrat like Lyndon Johnson It took the election of a Republican and avowed anti-Communist, Richard Nixon, to make it feasible

Finally, the strategy was successful because the plan was proportional There was no attempt to resolve all issues right away There was no effort to form an alliance, to establish formal diplomatic relations, to sign a treaty Rather, an *understanding* was reached and in those cases where interests were parallel, the two sides would be able to work together Chou understood the constraints which precluded more ambitious objectives He did not overreach, as a lesser strategist might have done

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